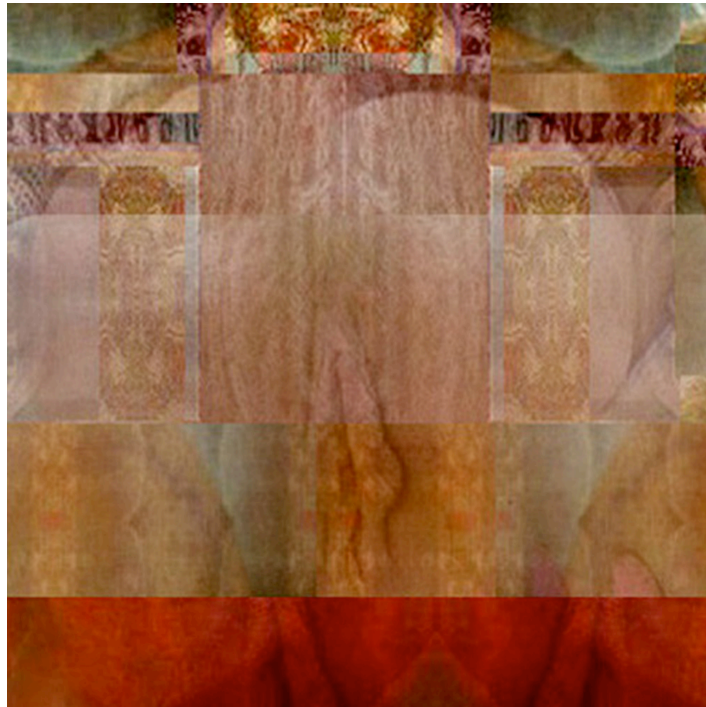


Voluptuous Viractualism
artists statement
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Joseph Nechvatal, *the birth Of the viractual* (2001) 70x70" computer-robotic assisted acrylic on canvas

My concept of viractuality - and viractualism - emerged out of the Ph.D. research I conducted in virtual reality at the Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts, over in the U.K.. It begins with the realization that every new technology disrupts previous rhythms of consciousness. It is central to my work as an artist. In fact, for me, the viractual realm is now the authentic domain of art in light of the information age.

The basis of the viractual conception is that virtual producing computer technology has become a significant means for making and understanding contemporary art and that this brings us artists to a place where one finds the emerging of the computed (the virtual) with the uncomputed corporeal (the actual). This merge – which tends to contradict some dominant techno clichés of our time - is what I call the ‘viractual’. This blending of computational virtual space with ordinary viewable space indicates the subsequent

emergence of a new topological cognitive-vision of connection between the computed virtual and the uncomputed corporeal world.

Gilles Deleuze's consideration of Baruch Spinoza - the 17th century philosopher who merged mind and matter into one substance - was a key influence. In Deleuze's *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* Deleuze pointed me towards a recognition of my desires' productiveness, as he indicated how desires propel us to move towards greater or lesser states of exalted wholeness depending on whether the thing encountered enters into composition with us, or on the contrary, tends to decompose us.

Digitization is a key metaphor for viractuality in the sense that it is the fundamental translating system today. But I think that in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest the art tradition away from conformisms that are about to overpower it. The viractual recognizes and uses the power of digitization while being culturally aware of the values of monumentality and permanency – qualities which can be found in some powerful analog art. It is a significant concept, I feel, which indicates and initiates communions of the protoplasmic body to virtual spatial conditions. As Roy Ascott, in his essay *The Architecture of Cyberception*, has said, "... to inhabit both the real and virtual worlds at one and the same time, and to be both here and potentially everywhere else at the same time is giving us a new sense of self, new ways of thinking and perceiving which extend what we have believed to be our natural, genetic capabilities." Consequently, the viractual has begun articulating a new techno-digital sense of life and art for me.

Surely the viractual has proven to be a useful conceptual operative for constructing a fuller account of my own work to myself, as well as much other art today. Take the work of Inka Essenhigh, for example. Undoubtedly the viractual propels my creativity - and has since I started exploring the viractual image back in 1986 when I started creating ridiculously complex numeric images which consisted increasingly of a mixture of drawing, digital-photography, painting, written language, and externalized computer code - all of which got submitted to computational manipulations (including viral attacks).

This viractual subject and method will be exemplified again in the new digitalia work which I showed under the title of *vOluptuary: an algOrithmic hermaphornology* in May 2002 at Universal Concepts Unlimited. The viractual will be exemplified here by mixing my artificial-life virus project with my continuing project as a post-Warholian painter. This combination of stasis and a flight manifests in the form of computer-robotic assisted paintings which depict representations of the intimate body which are associated with sexuality. But these representations then are problematized through hermaphroditic (alchemical) depictions which are achieved through algorithmic means.

Of crucial interest to *vOluptuary* will be the origin of the hermaphroditic image. This hybrid viractual image first appears in Ovid's classic text *Metamorphoses* - and perhaps this emergence is well worth recounting here. The hermaphrodite initially occurs in Western culture as a son of Hermes and Aphrodite named Hermaphroditus. Hermaphroditus was a typical, if exceptionally handsome, young male with whom the water nymph Salmacis fell madly in love. When Hermaphroditus rejected her sexual advances, Salmacis voyeuristically observed him from afar while desiring him fiercely. Finally, one spring day

Hermaphroditus stripped nude and dove into the pool of water which was Salmacis's habitat. Salmacis immediately dove in after him - embracing him and wrapping her body around his, just as, Ovid says, ivy does around a tree. She then prayed to the gods that she would never be separated from him – a prayer that they answered favorably. Consequently, Hermaphroditus emerged from the pool both man and woman.

The patriarchal construction of woman as other and the female body as object is deeply rooted in the supposed duality (opposites) of the (two) sexes. Most feminist theory questions this patriarchal construction of sex and gender, suggesting that sex is expressed through a continuum, rather than as an opposing couplet based on heterosexist male/female polarities. Accordingly, within my viractual multiverse, containments designed for womanhood/manhood are subverted by the presentation of ambiguous genitalia - the mutable image and performance of pan-sexuality. Gender here is viewed as an act of becoming. Here gender performance fails to sustain sex oppression by ceasing to draw the boundaries of the Other.

As such it is a provocation not only to male/female constructions of heterosexuality, but also to homosexual constructions of identity. This critique of 'representation' in the aesthetic sense is part of a critique of 'representation' in the political sense (and vice versa). Art here is seen as political in the sense that it is a site of power struggles which fail to presuppose a metaphysics which is itself a politics – a politics which establishes an order of values which often maintains the dominant order of meaning and power over break-through ideologies. Need I mention the war in which we are engaged against Islamic fundamentalism?

As the tale of Hermaphroditus suggests, my work now is about pansexual eroticism married to virtuality, quixotic transformation, and, of course, immersive excess. The viractual realm here is a political-spiritual chaosmos in the sense that new forms of sexual order arise such that any form of order is only temporary and provisional. But I don't think it is a chaosmos in the sense of ceaseless flux and chaos. Rather, this sphere is attained through an emergent viractual operation, and I take abundant pleasure in the forms of pan-order that arise within its algorithmic processes.

The point is that within viractual creation all sexual signs are subject to boundless semiosis - which is to say that they are translatable into other signs. Here, of course, it is possible to find resonances and affinities between sexual opposites. Here we can always articulate new sexes within. Here a new-sprung chameleon-like sexual demeanor is being built from the virtual abyss.

So the viractual is a new sensibility emerging in art respecting the integration of certain aspects of science, technology, myth and consciousness – a consciousness struggling to attend to the prevailing current spirit of our age. This viractual zeitgeist I identify as being precisely an autopoietic desiring machine in which everything, everywhere, all at once is connected in a rhizomatic web of communication. Therefore, the viractual is no longer content with the regurgitation of a standardized analog repertoire of image-tropes. Rather I detect in art a fertile attraction towards the abstractions of advanced scientific discovery - discovery now stripped of its fundamentally reductive logical methodology.

Concerning this viractual span of liminality, I am reminded here of two very different, yet complimentary, concepts: entrainment and égréore. Entrainment, in electro-physics, is the coupling of two or more oscillators as they lock into a commonly sensed interacting frequency. In alchemical terms an égréore (an old form of the word agréger) is a third concept or phenomenon which is established from conjoining two different elements together. I suggest that the term (concept) viractual (and viractuality) may be a concordant entrainment/égréore conception helpful in defining our now third-fused inter-spatiality which is forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual - a concept close to what the military call augmented reality, which is the use of transparent displays worn as see-through glasses on which computer data is projected and layered. A lacunae world of incessant transmutation has emerged and established a seemingly unrestricted area of abundance which I call the viractual.

references

The title of the Ph.D. dissertation is *Immersive Ideals / Critical Distances: A Study of the Affinity Between Artistic Ideologies Based in Virtual Reality and Previous Immersive Idioms*. A url introduction to the thesis, entitled *Frame and Excess*, can be read on-line and the entire thesis downloaded in PDF at: <http://www.eyewithwings.net/nechvatal/ideals.htm>

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